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ABSTRACT

Acknowledging that while it is difficult to suggest specific instructional strategies for accommodating differing adult beginning readers' (ABR) psychosocial behavior, this paper offers appropriate instructional principles based on the educational and social needs of the ABR. The principles presented are as follows: (1) teachers should help adults manage their time for maximum reading practice with minimal lesson time; (2) initial reading instruction may be best presented with materials in which adults have expressed a utilitarian interest; (3) adults must interact with the greater social/cultural environment to encourage more generalization in dealing with print; (4) adults should be encouraged to identify and organize their own approach to word recognition; (5) students will comprehend better when they can focus on the organization of the materials; (6) instruction should not stress the abstract (letter/sound) aspect of the reading process; (7) features or word cues most likely to be present when recall is required should be stressed when new materials are introduced; and (8) adults may learn more quickly using materials representing a relatively concrete level of experience. Each of the eight principles presented includes background research information and instructional implications or activities. (HTH)

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TEACHING THE ADULT BEGINNING READER: DESIGNING RESEARCH BASED READING INSTRUCTIONAL STRAGEGIES

A
paper presented at the College Reading Association
1981 Conference, Louisville, Kentucky

by

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Teaching the Adult Beginning Reader:
Designing Research Based Reading
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It is assumed that instructional strategies for any group would be based on learning theory and research related to that particular group. Thus, one would expect that reading instructional strategies suggested for adult beginning readers (ABRs) would call upon research and reading theory based on the ABR. These frameworks are important since available data suggests that a) reading behavior of ABRs differs from that of the child beginning reader (Hall, Ramig, Richardson, 1976; Boraks, 1979; Boraks and Schumacher, 1981); b) learning behavior of ABRs differs from that of adult proficient readers. (Boyd, 1969; Boraks and Schumacher, 1981) and c) the social-cultural goals, interests, and developmental needs of the ABR and proficient adult reader may differ (Labouvie-Vief, 1977; Knox, 1977; Fay, 1966; Boraks and Schumacher, 1981).

Unfortunately while the information base on the general behavior of the ABR in the learning-to-read situation has been well-documented (Mezirow, Darkenwald and Knox, 1975), the research on the specific learning and reading behaviors of ABRs is just emerging. Thus, while it is clear how instructional stragegies can accomodate differing ABR psycho-social behavior, it is more difficult to suggest more specific changes in the structuring of the ABR's learning/reading experiences. However, the framework for designing ABR instructional strategies can be developed around two concepts: a) knowledge of the impact of the broad social, cultural, economic context on ABR's learning behavior and b) knowledge of the learning needs of ABRs. Specifically we

know that ABRs are practiced and drilled, not taught (i.e. passive not active); and that ABRs, indeed adult non-proficient readers at all levels, view and process words as visual or phonemic units not semantic units (Hall, Ramig and Richardson, 1976; Boraks, 1978; Raisner, 1979; Boraks and Schumacher, 1981).

In developing instructional strategies for ABRs, we have focused on the need a) to broaden the social/cultural context of the learner, b) to help the ABR become an active learner and c) to stress reading as a meaning process. The need for more research on the learning-to-read behavior of ABRs should be evident as we pointedly draw from data on the adult proficient reader or child. By clarifying the research base used for generating instructional strategies for ABRs, we hope to magnify the need for more basic research on the ABR. By stating step-by-step instructional strategies, we hope to enable the ABR teacher to move instruction from a 'present-recite-test' approach to an 'active, thinking using' approach - an approach adult learning theories and some reading theories suggest is needed (Knox 1977, Goodman and Burke, 1973.)

The principles suggested below are then based on knowledge of the ABR's learning behavior and needs in relationship to available child, adult proficient learning theory. The guidelines for instruction are suggestive since these are based on a variety of sources.

The first three principles deal with the importance of the scope of the ABR's learning-to-read context.

Principle 1: Teachers should help adults manage their time for maximum reading practice to occur with minimal lesson time.

Background

Adults who want to learn to read do realize that achieving reading proficiency takes time and practice. They understand that what was not accomplished

during traditional school years may take less time to accomplish now, but will nonetheless require an important time investment. ABRs often express willingness to stay with the instruction for as long as it takes, but their commitment to learning to read is often interrupted by the constraints of day-to-day responsibilities.

Instructional Implications

Use of time management strategies which aid adults in clarifying their priorities becomes a valuable instructional device. Teachers can explain Lakein's theories, addressed in How To Get Control of Your Time and Your Life (1973). An appropriate instructional device might be for the teacher to read portions of this aloud (the chapters are very short) and then encourage group participation in Lakein's activities, such as deciding what lifetime goals they have, what priorities they have for the next five years, and then for the next six months. Moreover, there are several side-benefits: the teacher's oral reading provides a model of reading expression skills and of the value of reading for information. The group discussion encourages language facility as well as sharing learning experiences. Words may be generated for reading study which are part of an oral but not written vocabulary. Adults will begin to think about formalizing priorities which make it possible for them to focus on reading as an important goal, thus relegating some other goals to a lesser place of importance.

Teachers could introduce McClusky's Power-Load-Margin formula to adult students as a "nucleus for a teaching-learning model" (Main, 1979, p. 19). First, the formula should be explained: $\frac{\text{Power}}{\text{Load}}$ = Margin, where Load equals demands made on person by self and society; where Power is the resources a person has for coping with Load; where Margin is the relationship between Load and Power, or what is left over after responsibilities are taken care of. Of course,

the terminology and explanation would be in the students' language, not necessarily as stated here.

Next, the importance of Margin, or identifying the time left over, to use for learning to read time, could be stressed. Last, ways to apply what had been learned about reading during Margin time back into one's Load, or responsibilities, and Power, one's resources, should be explored.

Instructional Implication

For example, a parent could in learning to read, use as instructional material a children's book and then practice reading it to children during caretime with them (part of the Load in parental responsibilities), thus enhancing resources (Power) and increasing Margin. As another example, a worker could in learning to read, use as instructional material a job-related manual, perhaps in simplified form. She or he could then practice locating familiar words in the technical manual while on the job. Thus, while meeting one's responsiblities of work (Load), a student could be enhancing job performance and increasing resources for coping with work (Power), which could lead to an efficiency that provides more personal time (Margin).

Teachers who employ time management strategies while teaching reading to adults provide opportunities for the learning of values such as self-enhancement and ability to cope with change. Another important benefit of helping adults manage their time for maximum reading practice may be the reduction of attrition in an adult program. Adults often feel that they must drop out of a program because they become frustrated trying to invest time in learning while day to day survival needs load them down. Time management strategies become a resource for both the adults and the program survival.

Principle 2: Initial reading instruction may be best presented with materials in which adults have expressed an utilitarian interest. Again, it is preferrable to expand an adult's field of reading to include a broad recreational range of reading materials.

Background

By starting with the adult's interests, teachers can time the reading curriculum "to be in step with developmental tasks as the individual encounters them" (Vacca & Walker, 1980, p. 24), and then expand their goals and interests by helping to redefine and redirect them. While "utilitarian activities" have been rated by some young adults as more important than recreational reading (Kling & Tivenan, 1978), adults in mid-life and beyond may find task oriented reading materials will not be enough. (Merriam, 1978, p. 52) Adults do often change their interests and goals direction as they become older and as they read more proficiently. A choice of materials must be available.

Instructional Implication

For example, young Black adult education students expressed interest in reading materials such as the Bible, church-related reading and newspapers (Kling & Tivenan, 1978). Since these interests are similar to those of many young adults, materials such as modified newspapers (e.g. News For You) and functional activities such as those suggested by Chambers and Lowry (1975) are a good starting point. However, there is a need to move beyond these. By mid-life adults begin to reach beyond utilitarian goals and interests. They desire materials of an informational nature, such as information about career goals (Merriam, 1978) and situations of others. Introducing reading matter such as Studs Terkel's book Working in which cameos of workers are presented fulfills a new need and expands the reading field.

Bowie (1980) suggests encouraging adult students to list their personal readings on a Reading Record form with some critical comments and a recommendation.

These records are then shared at the beginning of an ABE class. Reading records could encourage broadened interests and take into consideration the ages and preferences of all adult students.

Principle 3: Adults must interact with the greater social/cultural environment to encourage less personalization and more generalization in dealing with print.

Background

Labouvie-Vief (1977) in reviewing the literature on elderly adults drew a parallel between elderly adults and members of minority groups who may have different and lower expectations, opportunities, life events...noting that this differentiation may occur along cultural lines. When this notion is related to the fact that "social isolation and low environment complexity may be among the strongest predictors of intellectual differentiation" one is compelled to deal with the social/cultural differences of many ABRs. This is crucial since many ABRs are from minority, culturally separated populations.

Social isolation might impact on reading behavior several ways. As Friere (1970) pointed out the feeling of helplessness/hopelessness can result from being an object versus an active participant in society. However, another admittedly smaller point, must be considered. That is, many ABRs do not discuss, deal with topics beyond their immediate environment. They are therefore dealing most often with concrete, personal issues.

Instructional Implications

If the cultural circle of a group of adults in a reading program reveals that they do not participate in the larger cultural context or their community/world or that all these facets are filtered through or interpreted for them a subculture institution (community center, church, union), then the need for

the adults and subsequent ability of adults to generalize about the larger environment might be limited. As ABR teachers promote consideration of less immediate tangible issues and problems, they are promoting the ability to generalize and to deal with abstractions. Frequently ABR teachers encourage students to relate materials to their own lives (i.e. to personalize) in order to promote comprehension. Other steps must be taken. Specifically it is suggested the ABRs must also discuss what is not present and tangible - they must deal with abstractions.

This moving of discussion from the known (concrete) inevitably involves moving from the personal to the general. Such discussions are made possible in many different ways. The easiest way seems to be by exploring the viewpoints of others and comparing these views to the ABR's views. In this way ABRs are depersonalizing and taking the first step to generalizing (compare/contrast).

Exploring views of others involves not just getting to know about other people/institutions in the community. ABRs 'know' about these people but there is little to suggest ABRs reflect upon this. When the community is recognizable as something other than or more than a source of 'authority figure', the 'man,' or a controlling, constricting forces-generalization to (comparing/constrasting)known events to that larger community might be more likely. There are two routes to 'critical consciousness'-knowledge of self and knowledge of others.

Thus the following specific teaching sequence is suggested-<u>for the adult population</u> who has participated in a restricted context:

a. Discuss an available but relatively unexperienced aspect of the social culture (for purposes of explicitness-a museum);

b. Speculate on all aspects of this institution, what it looks like; list types of people who might be involved in this institution;

c. List what each of these types of people might 'get out of' being involved in this institution, the skills they bring, the tasks they do (from curator to visitor);

d. Visit the institution/people;

e. Interview people identified;

f. Return to class. Discuss classes expectations/speculations in relation to findings;

g. Invite a speaker to generate a dialogue where perceived and actual responses are compared and evaluated;

h. Use this group of known views for future compare/contrast conversations, e.g. 'Who might a curator wish to have as president/why?' or 'Why might museum visitors want/not want greater community participation.'

The next two principles deal with promoting active versus passive learners. The goal is to have ABR students involved in assessing 'how' they are learning, not just in practicing a taught skill.

Principle 4: Adults should be encouraged to identify and organize their own approach to word recognition.

Background

Schwartz (1977) found younger students tended to possess but not use or 'integrate' the use of skills. That is, beginning readers could alternately use context or initial sounds to identify an unknown word but they would rarely use both of these skills together to identify the word. Boraks (1978) demonstrated that this was also true of ABRs and that adults often possess basic word recognition skills but do not consistently apply these skills, or even recognize that they possess these skills. Boraks suggested that adults could use and integrate use of skills if they were aware of what skills they in fact, had. Many ABRs would state they use one skill (e.g. phonemic cues) but would actually be using another skill. (e.g. graphic cues). However, Boraks found that once ABRs were helped to identify the skill they were using, they tended to use this strategy more consistently and successfully. Adult educators

have suggested that adult instruction focus on learning how-to-learn (Smith and Haverkamp, 1977). Moreover, Morris (1977) reviewed studies on adult learning and suggested that adults tend to learn better if they generate their own mnemonic system. Morris does qualify this suggestion by pointing out the limitations of the studies; specifically explaining that results might vary depending on the age, intelligence, time, and quality of the adult's self-generated system. For example Morris stressed that sheer practice in the sense of doing the same thing over and over again does not help improve memory.

The strategy adopted to attain and retain learning is important. That is, how the ABR plans to go about remembering and using information will influence learning. Most ABR teachers do not provide students with a learning/recall strategy or help the students generate such strategies. It is suggested here that ABR teachers do this and stress a) process over product or strategy over skill, b) promote use of ABR self-generated strategies, and c) include a system for remembering and using these strategies.

Instructional Implications

Specifically it is recommended that adults should be encouraged to identify and organize their own approach to word recognition. Stauffer (1971) has suggested that children identify steps they would take when they met an unknown word, an adapted form of this is recommended for ABRs. After teachers help students to use various cues (graphophonic, context, etc.) in recognizing words, it is suggested that they:

1. Monitor oral reading to determine cues students are using;
2. Help students understand cues they are using;
3. List, with student input, steps each student is and can use;
4. Encourage students to remind themselves of cues they can use when they meet an unidentified word.

ABRs generally state they spell a word, give the first 'sound', skip the word (use context) when asked to list steps, but responses are highly idiosyncratic and student use of cue may change as they gain reading skill. It is important, therefore, to constantly reassess with students the strategies they are using.

Principle 5: Students will comprehend reading material better when they can focus on the organization of the material.

Background

Questions teachers ask about reading material require that students already understand the organization of the material well enough to locate answers without any guidance. Thus, questioning becomes an advanced instructional strategy, as illustrated by an adapted form of Herber and Nelson (1975):

a. The teacher prepares statements for students' reactions stressing or essentially outlining the organization of the text. References are added to indicate where students might look in the text to determine if there is information to support the statements (page, column, paragraph, if necessary).

b. The teacher prepares statements for students' reactions. No references are given.

c. The teacher prepares questions for students to answer. Questions relate to organization, i.e., Does the author list, describe etc. References are added to indicate where students might look in the text to find information which, when combined, might answer the question.

d. The teacher prepares questions for students to answer. No references are given.

e. Students survey the material, raise their own questions and answer them at least one question must relate to organization of material. Students produce statements of meanings, concepts and ideas as they read.

When teachers focus on the organization of the material, they are teaching students how to learn and how to become independent enough to comprehend print on their own. Thus, they are teaching the process of reading. Smith and Haverkamp (1971) stress that process activities enable a reader to become a

more effective learner than do content activities since learning how to learn necessitates "having or acquiring the knowledge and skill and essential to learning effectively in whatever situation he encounters," (p. 17).

Instructional Activity

An instructional activity which illustrates this principle is the leveled guide as suggested by Herber. Statements about a reading passage are constructed. Adults are asked to verify the statements. Information as to where in the passage they find verification is given. No questions are asked.

Court Decision*

> The Supreme Court ruled on a death penalty case. It said states cannot require judges to give the death sentence to anyone convicted of killing a policeman. Judges and juries must be free to look at all the facts in a case, and choose a lesser punishment if it is fitting.
>
> *from News For You, edition H, June 22, 1977, published by New Readers Press, Syracuse, New York.

Questions such as these could be asked, although they provide no organizational information for the student: On what did the Supreme Court rule? What did the ruling say? Why do you think they ruled this way? What do you think about this decision?

More helpful to the adult would be the construction of statements such as these:

I. Check the statement if the newspaper article said this:
   _____The Supreme Court ruled on a death penalty case. (1st sentence)
   _____States can't require judges to give the death sentences to someone convicted of killing a policeman. (2nd sentence)
   _____Judges and juries should not have to follow hard and fast rules without a chance to consider each case. (3rd sentence)

II. Check the statement on the organization of material:
   _____The paragraph lists reasons for the death penalty
   _____The paragraph explains the supreme court ruling
   _____The paragraph argues against the ruling

III. Check the statement if you agree with it. Put an asterisk beside the statement if you think the Supreme Court would agree with it:
_____Punishment should be fitted to the crime.
_____An eye for an eye.
_____People are not all equally guilty.

As a side benefit to such a guide, small groups of adults can work together to check statements, thus helping each other to read and all getting a chance to participate. During a questioning procedure, however, only one adult at a time can respond; other adults may not be learning.

The next two principles relate to the need to have ABRs deal with reading as meaning.

Principle 6: Adults must be instructed in ways which do not stress the abstract (letter/sound) aspect of the reading process.

Background

Boyd (1969) in a provocative study evaluated the ability of adult non-readers to deal with abstract symbols. While the results of this study must be interpreted with comparison group who would participate in the study (i.e. matching), the idea proposed and research by Boyd has potentially important implications. Boyd found the 15 illiterate adults were significantly lower in ability to deal with visual symbols than his matched group. The implication of this for understanding instruction of ABRs relates to the fact one must deal symbolically with concepts in print to maintain, reorganize and evaluate these concepts and that dealing with print itself involves dealing with abstractions (i.e. graphic symbols). Thus, a reassessement of the use of sound/symbol association or decoding as a total approach in instructing ABRs must be reassessed.

Polanyi (1971) noted that if one shifts his/her meaning of a symbol, to the symbol as an object-viewed in itself, she/he destroys its meaning (p. 34). Adults in fact may be doing this. For example, one writer heard the following dialogue between an instructor and adult learner:

Instructor: Read this (points to Xmas, Dr.).

ABR: It say X and mas-if it didn't have that (points to X) it would mean Christmas.

Instructor: What does it mean?

ABR: X and mas. This (points to Dr.) says D.r., it means you say doctor.

It would appear that the clear break between (graphic) symbol and meaning may be presenting increasing problems for the ABR. Certain instructional strategies (decoding) emphasize this view of graphic symbol as an entity in itself (i.e. as a signal for a sound/symbol association versus as a layer symbol of meaning). Since ABRs also make very little use of semantic cues there a need to reassess the stress often placed on graphophonic cues.

Instructional Implications

It is suggested that ABR teachers not emphasize an abstract/symbol approach to reading but stress relating meaning to symbols (words) by teaching reading using functional or language-experienced based programs.

Principle 7: When introducing new words to students, stress features or word cues most likely to be present when recall is required.

Adults are often introduced to words in isolation and asked to analyze these words in terms of auditory (i.e. what does it sound like) and visual (what words does it look like) features (Boraks and Schumacher, 1981). Colheart (1977) points out that the memory trace for words is a function of that initial analysis. Thus, if auditory cues were stressed, the word is more likely to be recalled when similar auditory cues are available; when meaning cues are stressed, the word is most likely to be recalled if meaning cues are present.

Tulving and Osler (1968) have also stressed the importance of learning with appropriate cuing in mind, and it has been suggested that meaning cued promote

recall better than phonemic (rhyming word) cues. Since adults will meet most words in context, the importance of recognizing the most potent cue of words available to adults when reading text (syntax, semantics) and helping adults to focus on these cues when words are being learned needs to be stressed.

Instructional Implications

Since the cues most likely to be availabe to an adult are context (syntax, semantics) cues, words should be introduced in context. Secondary emphasis then would go to visual and auditory cues. The following steps then might be taken in introducing a new word.

a) New word appears in five different (meaningful) sentences;

b) Adults are asked to read sentences and identify only unknown words;

c) Use of context in identifying these unknown words is discussed;

d) Relevant auditory and visual features of the words are noted-expanded upon;

e) Sentences are reread, semantic and syntactic cues are reviewed;

f) Different sentences using new words are generated, written and read.

This last principle brings together in a very pragmatic way, the view inherent in all previous principles: that learning starts with the learner and progresses as meaning.

Principle 8: Adults may learn to read more quickly when they are exposed to initial reading material representing a relatively concrete level of experience. As teachers recognize that students possess enough knowledge and experiential background, reading material of a more abstract nature should be introduced.

Background

In a review of Piagetian research findings, Long, McCrary and Ackerman (1979) suggest that many adults may not have achieved a stage of formal operations. "The formal operations stage is not age-resistant," (p. 15). Therefore, exposing

adult students who may be operating at a concrete level to materials of an abstract nature will produce frustration rather than instill a climate for learning to read. Grotelueschen (1979) determined that if an adult has little prior knowledge and experience with a concept, she or he will learn best with materials which "progress from the concrete to the abstract," (p. 75). If adults do possess prior knowledge of the concept, than introducing more abstract reading materials may be of maximum benefit.

Instructional Implications

First, then, teachers of reading must not assume that adult students are operating at either a formal of abstract level. The reading materials presented in beginning lessons should be of a concrete nature. Functional materials such as signs, labels, menus, and advertisements would be appropriate because they are familiar and do not require concept building or reasoning beyond the level of the material. Materials which are more concept laden ought to be introduced gradually, as the teacher recognizes that the adults need to and can start to understand them.

For instance, one of the authors (Richardson, 1981) had been struggling to teach a twenty-two year old beginning reader by using the commerical material Reader's Digest Skill Builders for Adults. Progress was very slow. The man seemed unable to talk about the stories. During one lesson, she read him a language experience story (LEA) produced by another adult at the same center. The story dealt with a robbery. Immediately, this student perked up and shared his own experience of being robbed. A language experience story was then written. This LEA became the basis for three lessons. After that, some language based experience was used during each lesson and reading in the commercial material was reintroduced. The student was able to recognize words learned from the LEAs in the commercial material. He was able to talk about

the stories much more fully. The commercial material may have been too abstract for him as introductory material, but became suitable after background material of a concrete nature was provided.

Another implication of this same principle is that teachers should not assume adults will define reading in the comprehensive and abstract way that the teachers or adult proficient reader would. Although teachers view reading as a process which encompasses sophisticated comprehension skills and fulfills the reader, many ABRs, as noted earlier, view reading very concretely and personally. Hall, Richardson and Ramig (1976) found that adult students often define reading as decoding, or getting the letters. Teachers will want to encourage adult students to view reading broadly, as a sophisticated process which brings intrinsic pleasure, but should not be discouraged if adults initially expect their lessons to be phonics related. As discussed earlier promoting use of the ABR's current skills and expectations is the initial but not final step in the learning-to-read process.

Conclusion

These eight principles are directed at generating instructional strategies which expand active and meaningful reading. While some of these principles may seem obvious, few teachers of adults can cite a solid base for applying them. Many of these principles are not implemented in adult reading programs at all. Thus, the paper provides a rationale for instructional common-sense strategies and very specific ways to implement these strategies.

The practices suggested here relate to valid needs of the adult beginning reader, but the practices themselves need to be adapted and validated with the ABRs you teach. Available research on the ABR is limited. The greatest need remains: the need for more basic information on the learning and learning-to-read behavior of adult beginning readers.

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